

THE PLAIN DEALER

Strange bedfellows working to save act that protects endangered species

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Quick! What president signed the Endangered Species Act?

Answer: Richard Nixon, 1973, a time of fierce political division between many citizens and government, maybe more than now.

Yet he handed environmentalists (not his natural constituency) a tool for challenging developers, industry, big agriculture and governments whose actions threaten endangered plants and animals and their habitats.

Who knew that 32 years later, a congressman from Nixon's political party (Republican) and state (California) would work to toss into the scrap can one of the nation's most visible environmental laws? Or that citizens as disparate as Jews and evangelical Christians would join as the Noah Alliance in strenuous opposition, on ethical grounds, to the lawmaker's efforts?

That's what's happened. The opposition shows how groups entrenched in different camps sometimes find common ground.

The Endangered Species Act's not perfect. Its red tape can be costly and frustrating. But it has named more than 1,300 species eligible for protection and brought some back from the brink. That seems not to impress U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo. He suggested business operates smoother without fretting about sandhill cranes.

The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Resources, of which he's chairman, moved his bill Tuesday for a House vote. Passage in the House and Senate, and the president's signature, guts the old law and limits what government can do to protect any peregrine falcons, snail darters or Florida panthers that live there.

Pombo's bill seems friendlier to corporate profit than biological legacy and brought citizens from different religious and political positions to the act's defense. Noah emerged as a model for interfaith cooperation.

This week it trumpeted its opposition, each religious tradition citing ethical arguments for leaving the law as it has been.

And what do you know? They see these things similarly.

According to Calvin DeWitt, environmental professor at the University of Wisconsin and president of the Academy of Evangelical Scientists and Ethicists, "Protection of God's creatures is a profoundly religious issue with deep roots in scriptures."

And in a conference call that included Noah leaders, Conservative Rabbi Amy Levin, from Cranston, R.I., said, "The Jewish tradition views the weakening of the [ESA] as a transgression of the commandment to care for God's creations."

DeWitt called the Pombo bill "a wolf in sheep's clothing," a destructive force under the guise of environmental legislation.

Roald Hoffmann, a Nobel laureate in chemistry, a Jew and a professor at Cornell University, made a practical point in the conference call, that pharmaceuticals "are products of life forms. To destroy a species is the equivalent of entering a library and, before reading the books, destroying them."

Accelerating extinction rates are a crime, he said. The bill "takes science out of scientists' hands and puts it into politics."

DeWitt acknowledged evangelicals seldom stand "in the forefront" of social and political disputes, but siding with Jewish leaders here puts the alliance at the lead regarding ethical treatment of our planet.

Bravo for such leadership; bravo for setting differences aside to fight for common values.

Noah's ads in newspapers and on radio and television show how traditional divisions don't have to negate shared concerns.